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SUBJECT: VATICAN TO HOST MUSLIM SCHOLARS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, Pol Chief.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)
Summary and Background

11. (U) The Holy See will host the first formal meeting of the Catholic-Muslim Forum November 4 to 6. The forum is the result of the dialogue appeal letter that 138 Muslim scholars sent to Pope Benedict XVI following his controversial September 2006 Regensburg address. That letter, entitled "A Common Word", has now been endorsed by 271 scholars, imams and other Muslim leaders, according to the <http://www.acommonword.com> website.

12. (SBU) At the forum, twenty-four Muslim scholars and public personalities and twenty-four Catholic counterparts will debate the meaning of "love of God and love of neighbor" and "human dignity". The discussion on human dignity will include Catholic appeals for freedom of religion. The Pope will receive the scholars on November 6. Prince Ghazi of Jordan will lead the Muslim delegation, while Cardinal Tauran will head the Catholic. While recognizing the forum's limits, the Vatican is positive about the process and hopeful that it will encourage proponents of inter-religious dialogue to support religious freedom. End summary and background.

Outcomes and program

13. (C) On October 23, Father Miguel Ayuso, Director of the Vatican-affiliated Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies and a frequent Holy See representative at inter-religious meetings, told polchief he was managing expectations about what the forum could deliver. For Ayuso, the process itself is more important than the final declaration, which will be agreed upon prior/prior to the meeting.

14. (C) Muslim scholars promoted "love" as the theme for the dialogue (Note: "love" is the "common word" to which the scholars alluded in their letter to the Pope. End note.) Thus, the first day will focus on how Christianity and Islam coincide in their belief in a loving God and his commandment for human beings to love one another. Ayuso and other Holy See officials point out that love of God and neighbor is a basic and uncontroversial part of Christianity, and attribute the Muslim scholars' focus on love for this conference as an attempt to improve the image of Islam post 9/11.

15. (C) The second day of discussions will cover human dignity, a topic proposed by the Holy See. The Vatican does not believe that all religions are equal, but rather that followers of all religions are equal in dignity. It sees dignity as linked to

basic rights, such as religious freedom, an issue that Ayuso said the Catholic delegation will raise during the meeting.

¶6. (SBU) The final day of the program includes an audience with the Pope, at which he will deliver brief remarks, and a lunch. The lunch will take place inside Vatican City State as a sign of hospitality --which is symbolically important for Arabs and Muslims. In the afternoon, the forum participants will present the outcome document at an open session.

¶7. (SBU) Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal is a member of the Jordanian royal family and Special Advisor to King Abdullah II. His participation underscores the role of the Amman-based Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought --of which he is Chairman-- as a platform for the "A Common Word" initiative. His Catholic counterpart, Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, is the President of the Pontifical Council on Inter-religious dialogue, and the former Vatican deputy foreign minister-equivalent. Tauran often underlines the need for dialogue to produce concrete results. He has advocated engagement that accepts and respects differences between Islam and Christianity, rather than pursuing theological common ground.

Comment

¶8. (C) The Holy See is positive about the forum and hopes that it will increase the profile of Islamic leaders and scholars committed to peace and tolerance. Vatican officials appreciate the non-controversial character of the position and outcome documents that "A Common Word" has produced thus far, most recently the Communique from the October 12 to 15 Cambridge Conference with Protestant denominations. Vatican officials also believe that the public relations successes of "A Common Word" may foster a healthy competition between the Jordanian and Saudi royals in promoting inter-religious dialogue (ref. B).

¶9. (C) Vatican officials question, however, the extent to which "A Common Word" scholars influence intolerant minorities and

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large segments of Muslim public opinion. The Vatican would like to see more influential Islamic religious and political leaders subscribe to this initiative. Concurrently, it will continue to keep its doors open to different inter-religious dialogues (such as that sponsored by Saudi Arabia). In all such initiatives, the Vatican will continue to patiently but persistently pursue religious freedom. End comment.
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